



Department of Children and Families *Spotlight On What's Right*



A MESSAGE FROM COMMISSIONER HAMILTON



Happy Thanksgiving! May this holiday bring all of us some well-deserved rest and relaxation with our own families as we reflect on our accomplishments with those we serve.

In November, we celebrate National Adoption Month, and the families committed to providing permanent homes for children. This year's theme is *"Honoring Youth: Strengthening Pathways for Lasting Bonds,"* with a focus on helping older youth in foster care find permanent families.

With over 40 adoptions completed this past Friday, it brings the total to nearly 220 this year. Thank you to each person who contributes to the permanency process - our DCF team, judges, court personnel, attorneys for both children and parents, service providers, foster and adoptive families and community partners.



We always appreciate the support of Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz throughout the year who also attended Adoption ceremonies with me in Hartford.



What a day we had!

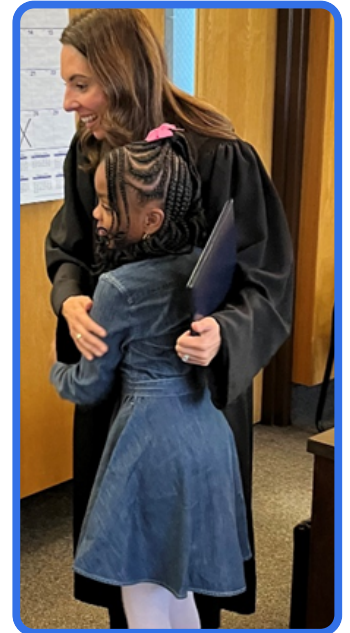
16-year-old Taylor was adopted by the Thompson family. Read *"What Started as a Weekend Stay Became a Forever Home,"* to understand her journey. Taylor describes her family as "spectacular," and she now has three older sisters and a brother. With tears of joy, the adoption was finalized.

Taylor's new sister, Laura Thompson, is a DCF worker,

and ironically in the same courtroom 30 minutes later, completed the adoption of a child on her caseload. Naiyah was surrounded by her "village" on this special day and when the proceedings were over, hugged Judge Carla Nascimento.

Watch the coverage of these families on WTNH here: [CT Adoption Day Brings 40 Families Together](#) and on Fox 61: [Local teen's life forever changes on Connecticut Adoption Day](#)

Elias Martinez has been living with the Baez family for three years. "I'm very excited to be Elias' father," Joselito Baez told the Court. As Elias sat patiently playing with cars with his little brother on the courtroom table, the adoption proceeding was not over until he told everyone in attendance "Elias Baez" is now his permanent name!



Not a seat was available in New Haven when Jameka Sayles and her family achieved legal permanency. Ms. Sayles herself was a child in foster care and became licensed as she wanted to "Pay it forward." Sisters Jalayiah and A'Londra now have a permanent home with a possible third adoption of a sibling in the near future! Read *"Stepping Forward When the Moment Calls: Jameka Sayles' Journey From Foster Youth To Forever Mom,"* to learn more about her.

Coverage can be seen of these adoptions on NBC 30: [Emotional Ceremonies Held on Adoption Day](#)

After a quick 10-minute hearing in Waterbury Juvenile Court, energetic, smart and beautiful four-year-old Aislin was adopted by Tara Baumann. There is more to this story. Tara is a DCF worker in Danbury, and her family filled the courtroom while her colleagues took part in the hearing virtually! Read about Tara's adoption journey, her 4 babysitters, 12 car seats and that slushy machine.



Cathy Rieben-Kay of Milford officially adopted 20-month-old Evan, her biological grandson. Evan's father passed away before Evan was born and before he even knew he fathered a child. Evan's energy and enthusiasm for life were evident in the courtroom. "He's a really good kid and very smart; he understands everything you say," Rieben-Kay said of Evan. "He has the same nonstop energy as my son; I figure he'll be a marathon runner." The family can be seen here on WFSB: [Milford grandmother adopts grandson on Connecticut Adoption Day.](#)



If there was one picture that captured the day, perhaps it would be 11-year-old Sherray celebrating her adoption with arms raised into the air! A kinship adoption, she is now being raised by her aunt. Read more about the family here: [CT Adoption Day makes over 40 families official: 'A special day'](#)

We are thankful to DCF Foster Care Division Program Supervisor Lori

Franceschini and Superior Court for Juvenile Matters Court Planner Peter Fradiani for their "behind the scenes" work and steadfast organization to make Connecticut's Adoption Day a resounding success!

Special thanks as well to Chief Administrative Judge of Juvenile Matters the Honorable Judge Tammy Nguyen-O'Dowd and the following Judges for making this day an incredible experience: Bridgeport - Judge Stephanie McLaughlin. Hartford - Judge Carla Nascimento. New Britain- Judge Norma Sanchez-Figueroa.



New Haven - Judge Bernadette Conway, Judge Tara Knight and Judge Christine Rapillo. Rockville- Judge Margaret Murphy. Torrington- Judge Erik Lohr. Waterbury- Judge Sara Nadim and Waterford- Judge Barbara Hoffman.



We continue to need loving and supportive foster and adoptive parents for our children! Thank you to the Foster Care Division under the leadership of Program Supervisor Aimee Richter for organizing the Weekend for a Lifetime event in Waterbury. This intensive one-weekend training allows the licensing process to be expedited for the over 20 enthusiastic families in attendance.

A shout out one more time to the



October Employees of the Month! Who has been nominated for the November Award? Read to see who is described as "Mamma Bear" a "true asset," and who sprinkles "extra cheer," with her presence.

In this mission you are never alone

Stay positive and be happy
Work hard and don't give up
Surround yourself with happy
warm and genuine people.

God Bless you and
Give you the strength
to see you through

Know my heart will never be the same.
I'm in with you. I'll be there.
From my mother's heart...
- A LITTLE BIT STRONGER!

Meriden is here to support New Britain!

Strength/Courage

DCF STRONG

Can't imagine how heavy your walk must be.
The weight of tragedy, loss can be debilitating, I
know. In this moment and many moments ahead I
pray you remember that good work you have done and the

Remember your strength & purpose
Even in the darkest moments your compassion & resilience
bring hope & healing to others.

**Now Britain have been having a really difficult
situation with coronavirus and compassion this job
is there any way for a point of help for you are
we there for you. We support you Always
and each other**

DCF STRONG

"WHAT STARTED AS A WEEKEND STAY BECAME A FOREVER HOME" TAYLOR'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A THOMPSON



For nearly 35 years, Dawn and John Thompson have opened their doors and their hearts to children in need of safety, stability, and love. What began as a commitment through the Connecticut Department of Children and Families later grew into almost two decades as therapeutic foster parents through The Village in Hartford, inspired, in part, by the lives their daughters built in the same world.

The Thompson's have three daughters and a son. Two of their daughters, Danielle and Laura, foster children as well, moved by what they witnessed in their childhood home. Laura, now a dedicated DCF social

worker, is deeply embedded in the work she grew up around. "It is how our family lives, we welcome, we support, we stay connected," Dawn said.

Over the years, the Thompsons have fostered four children through DCF, including one kinship placement for a cousin's child. They also raised a young girl through a friend-of-the-family arrangement, parenting her from age 12 through college and proudly watching her become a clinician and school therapist. Another placement was a teenage boy living in a group home who attended the Police Athletic League program, where



Dawn served as coordinator. One day,

he asked his DCF social worker if Dawn could foster him, and he stayed with the Thompsons until he went to college. Their consistency, their values, and their unwavering commitment to every child who crossed their threshold have shaped not only the youth they cared for but also their own daughters, who grew into compassionate, service-minded adults. The Thompsons' gentle and steady approach to parenting, grounded in patience, empathy, and genuine belief in every child's potential, has raised really good kids.



Among all the children they have loved, Taylor, a bright, respectful, determined 16-year-old, will be their first and only adopted child.

Taylor first came to the Thompsons' home just before her thirteenth birthday for what was supposed to be a simple weekend respite. "I remember her being respectful and kind and just a really good kid," Dawn said warmly. When the weekend ended, Taylor asked if she could stay.

What she did not know was that Dawn felt the same way. "I knew I wanted her to stay long before she asked if she could," Dawn shared, "I just wanted her to do what she wanted." After conversations with both DCF and Village social workers, it was agreed that Taylor could remain in the home where she felt safe and loved. Not long after, Taylor asked Dawn if she would adopt her. "I was shocked," Dawn recalled, "but so grateful."



Taylor's relatives in New York embraced the decision with grace and love. She maintains a close connection with them and continues to visit, including spending Thanksgiving with them this year. Her aunt spent time in Connecticut getting to know Dawn and her family and ultimately said that Taylor should live where she felt most at home.

When interviewed, Taylor spoke with a gentle, cheerful voice, thoughtful and wise beyond her years. She is a sophomore at Windsor High School, enrolled in advanced classes, and runs indoor and outdoor track and field. When asked what she is most proud of, she said, "My grades and my ability to connect with people." She cares about how she presents herself because she already knows who she hopes to become. Taylor wants to be a DCF social worker.



"My experience makes me feel like I can help," she said. "I know what kids go through when they transition into the system. Being a foster kid does not feel normal at times; you feel different from your friends. With DCF visits and needing permission for things because DCF is your 'low-key parent,' it is hard."

When asked what being adopted means to her, Taylor answered with honesty and heart. "It means a lot to me. I thought I would age out of the system, never being adopted. Most people want young kids to raise and create memories with. I am so happy they chose me." She said she asked to stay with the Thompsons because she felt "so comfortable, so at home" with them. She had

been in Connecticut since 2019, had friends, stability, and a life she did not want to leave behind.

When asked what she is looking forward to the most, Taylor smiled and said, "That if I want to do something or go somewhere, now all I have to do is ask my mom, and not DCF."

When Taylor was asked to describe Dawn and John, she smiled and said they were "spectacular," adding that they are kind, empathetic, patient, and "so understanding."

Dawn and John remain close to their daughters, son and extended family, and their granddaughter, now 24, serves as Taylor's mentor and respite provider, another example of the generational impact of a family rooted in care. When asked what she and John are most proud of, Dawn grew emotional. "Everything," she said, "She is so bright, open to healing her past. She is a beautiful young lady and we love her."

As National Adoption Day approaches, Dawn admitted she felt "excited and nervous at the same time." She added softly, "I do not like the limelight. That is not why I do this." Her daughter Laura will also be in court that day, finalizing an adoption on her own DCF case, making the moment deeply personal for the entire family. She will be able to step across the hall and witness Taylor becoming a Thompson.

DCF social worker Sarah Kalka, who has supported Taylor's case, reflected on the meaning of this moment. "It has been a blessing to be a part of this family's journey," she said. "It really is magical to watch a youth be ready to accept love and for the family to give it so unconditionally. Taylor chose them as much as the Thompsons chose Taylor. They have been unwavering in their support of Taylor's growth and development and have been her biggest cheerleaders and advocates along the way." Sarah added, "I am amazed at how easily things have fallen into place for Taylor. The grace, resilience, and fortitude she has displayed over the years are just remarkable. And it is all because of the stability and security she has with the Thompsons. This is truly a special moment for the family to share and just the beginning of the rest of their lives."

For Taylor, the day brings joy and a touch of light-hearted humor. When asked how she feels, she said, "Happy and so excited," and joked that missing a school day is a wonderful bonus.

What began as a weekend stay, a simple respite placement, has grown into a permanent and unconditional bond. Taylor, now surrounded by the Thompsons' love, the support of her relatives in New York City, and the embrace of a family committed to her future, will walk into court on Friday not as a foster child, but as a daughter.

A Thompson, forever.

"STEPPING FORWARD WHEN THE MOMENT CALLS: JAMEKA SAYLES' JOURNEY FROM FOSTER YOUTH TO FOREVER MOM"



(R-L) Jameka Sayles, Jalayiah, A'Londra and the family's DCF social worker Shonda Roberts.

As November, National Adoption Month, celebrates the power of permanency and the families who make it possible, few stories embody its spirit more than that of Jameka Sayles, an educator, mentor, and, as of Adoption Day 2025, the now adoptive mother of two siblings.

Having experienced a form of foster care herself while growing up, Jameka felt called to "pay it forward"

and support children in need of stability and love. Jameka toyed with the idea of becoming a foster parent but only when the timing was right.

"For me, fostering was about giving back," she explained. "I always knew I wanted to help kids the way others helped me."

Despite that desire, the timing never felt quite right. Jameka built her career in education as a New Haven Public Schools classroom teacher for more than two decades. She now serves the district as an Educator Instructional Coach for math and literacy. Surrounded by children every day, Jameka grew to become the kind of adult she once needed.

"Originally, I strictly just wanted to foster... I figured I would take a kid for a short period of time, love them up, and give them back. That was my mindset."

The moment finally arrived when Jameka heard a foster care radio commercial during the pandemic – a moment when so many were rethinking life and purpose. Something clicked and she felt an immediate "epiphany." It was time.

While Jameka recalls "adoption wasn't something I pictured," life had other plans. For Jameka, that plan came in the form of two siblings: Jalayiah and A'Londra.



Jalayiah & A'Londra make their adoption "official" on Adoption Day 2025.

"From the beginning, I said if the opportunity ever came to keep [the siblings] then I would."

The oldest joined Sayles at just 11 months old, while A'Londra came to her directly from the hospital.



Together, the girls filled her home and her heart. Over time, the relationship shifted from caregiver to mom, and from placement to now permanency. Their bond is unmistakable.

"They've had support from others along the way," she said, "but in their minds, I'm mom."

When the girls took Jameka's last name on Adoption Day, it made official what they have long felt: Jameka is "mom."

This National Adoption Month, Jameka's story shines as a reminder of what foster care and adoption are truly about: love, resilience, and stepping forward when the moment calls. For

Jameka, fostering began as a way to give back. Today, it has grown into a forever family for two little girls who now have a place to call home—permanently.

"It's official, they're part of my family now." And she added, simply and confidently, "They're mine. But they've always been mine."

"RELATIONSHIPS DO MATTER"



"You will never not know she is in the room," is how Tara Bauman describes four-year-old Aislin. True to form, as the family waited in the courthouse lobby on Adoption Day, Aislin was her energetic and engaging self, throwing a stuffed penguin to her extended family who came to celebrate this special day with her.

Aislin proudly walked into courtroom and just over 10 minutes later, was taking pictures with the Judge who finalized her legal permanency. Cheers and applause were heard inside the room and virtually as

Tara's DCF colleagues observed the hearing, supporting one of their own. "My family here at DCF," is how Tara refers to them.

Tara Baumann knows what this day is all about as she has been a DCF Social Worker for almost 5 years after working in New York Child Protective Services and Adult Parole for almost two decades.

Tara became licensed in 2022, recognizing the shortage of foster homes in the state. This was a role familiar to her as she also had "informal" experience as a kinship provider assisting her mother in raising her niece for the first 6 years of her life. "Let's try it and see how it goes," was her mindset when entering the licensing process.

Since 2022, Tara has cared for a total of four children. With each, she built a relationship with

the birth family which

continues until this day. "I do believe that the relationship you have with these kids' parents can make or break your experience because if you treat people with respect, they will treat you with respect," she stated.



Tara's first placement was a 6-year-old girl who "struggled a lot," eventually reunifying after 16 months in her home. "A great kid," is how she describes her as



they worked through significant behavioral challenges. "It was hard, but I definitely don't regret it. Her mom and I developed a very good relationship." In June 2024, she returned home. "I'm her emergency contact on everything. I'm like her second mom." Tara recently helped the family secure housing.

In August 2024, Tara was called for Aislin. "She's a great kid. She's smart, she's adorable she's funny," Tara emphatically stated. "She's a challenge every single day but I think it will serve her well in the future." Tara immediately saw Aislin's resilience, independence and her enhanced vocabulary for such a young little girl. The bonds quickly formed.

Immediately, Tara met Aislin's mother, exchanged numbers and the relationship began. Tara arranged and facilitated weekly visits on the weekends, wanting to ensure Aislin had the structure and consistency she needed. At first, the plan was reunification which quickly changed to adoption



"Foster parents and biological parents can build relationships," she pointed out.

Shortly thereafter, the call came again, and the Agency needed a placement for two sisters until they could transition to grandparents in New York. "I agreed to four days, and they stayed six months," Tara laughed when describing how from November of 2024 to April 2025 she had three little girls under the age of five years in her home.

The three little ones slept in the same bedroom which was like a "slumber party" each night. When sharing a room appeared to have an adverse effect on Aislin, Tara slept on the couch for 5 months so Aislin could sleep in her bed and have her own room.



Aislin refers to these girls as her "sisters" and they still continue to talk. "She loves being the big sister. She loves younger kids." Tara stated. "Go ahead mama, you got this," Aislin shouted as the youngest was taking her first steps.

Again, Tara built a relationship with the grandparents of the two sisters and the birth parents who were "very difficult towards DCF" but Tara found a way to engage them. Phone calls, text messages and pictures were freely exchanged during the placement and after the girls left. "We couldn't have done this without you," the grandparents told her.



Moving forward, Tara will only accept placements of children under the age of two years which is in the best interests of Aislin who prefers the big sister role.

Whatever the children placed into her home need, Tara gave them. When describing her role as a foster parent, Tara's intentions are clear. "DCF doesn't take my kids anywhere," she stated reflecting the commitment she makes to each child who enters her home. "I drive them to visits, I pick them up, I take them to the pediatrician, I take them to the dentist. I do it all."

So how does a single parent and full-time DCF Investigator handle all these responsibilities?

"I have four babysitters. I own 12 car seats. It's really quite ridiculous," she stated. Tara has a well-organized "village" to support her and Aislin especially when late night emergencies at DCF require long hours. "Amazing" is how she refers to her babysitters. Each one has a car seat, so they are prepared for the last-minute calls. One was a child adopted from the Danbury Office.



Tara is also quick to praise the comradery and bonds of her DCF colleagues in the Investigations Unit and the unconditional support they provide each other. Each and every one of them plays a supportive role. A co-worker's daughter cares for Aislin occasionally. Tara took a colleague's children home one night when her mother was responding to a family in crisis.

"That's just what we do here in my office. We all support each other to the best of our ability," Tara mentioned. "We care for each other's kids in a time of need, go pick them up at their schools or daycares when one of us cannot leave work. We just get it done.

I would never leave this office for that reason."

The Investigation's team also get together outside of work and has the occasional potluck lunches with Tara bringing the only slushy machine in the office. They were "so excited" when the adoption was going through. "I don't think I would have done this as successfully without them," she stated.

Tara is also quick to praise Social Worker Travis King from Milford for his support. "My experience with him was great. He is always available. I can text him anytime and get an answer. He works way too much if you ask me," Tara stated. Travis' relationship was evident with Aislin as she gave him a big hug when he walked into the courthouse.



"Tara has been phenomenal to work with and her love for Aislin is amazing. Tara has put Aislin's needs above her own and she provides the emotional security that Aislin requires given the emotional trauma that she's experienced in her young life. This is a perfect match made in Heaven, and I'm so happy that Tara and Aislin found each other. 11/21/25 will be their 1st day until forever," Travis stated.

"Amidst the cases and the chaos, Tara Bauman, a dedicated DCF investigator, found her greatest reward in the heart of a child. This National Adoption Month, she not only gave Aislin a home, but also a future filled with love and hope. In the journey of adoption, Tara proves that patience, love and an open-heart lead us to the families we were always meant to find," stated Danbury Program Supervisor Jennifer Birden.



Aislin and Tara are now a permanent family. With great pride, Tara describes her little girl. "She gets kindness awards, she loves all her friends, she likes to do chores, she like to make her own lunch at night. She's very independent for her age. She can buckle and unbuckle her car seat, gets herself dressed in the morning, brushes her hair and her own teeth."

Tara recognizes the importance of children maintaining lifelong connections with their family, despite legal permanency with another. Tara has agreed to an open adoption with Aislin's mother and to facilitate three visits a year with updates and pictures being sent via email. Just last week, Tara sent Aislin's mother updated school pictures.

"The perception of our families versus the reality of who they are can be two very different things." Tara stated. "Her mom is a great person who just struggles. We have a solid relationship."

"Relationships do matter."

Aislin has now found her "forever home" and was one of 43 children adopted during Connecticut's Adoption Day.

Congratulations!

NOVEMBER EMPLOYEES OF THE MONTH



CONNECTICUT Children & Families

Employee of the Month Awards!

Congratulations to the following staff who have been nominated within their respective Divisions to receive the November Employee of the Month Award!

Chandra Hegde - CT KIND

Chandra Hegde is being nominated for Employee of the Month for his dedication to DCF and the CT-KIND Project. Chandra was recently promoted officially to DCF's Customer Success Manager. He has worked tireless hours with the project team working to promote functionality and resolve issues within CT-KIND. Chandra previously worked as a consultant for DCF in IT but left to pursue a full-time permanent position in the private sector with higher pay. Eric Nixon was instrumental in wooing Chandra back into service to DCF a few years ago as he knew the meaningfulness of this work in protecting children. Chandra is very dedicated and passionate about the work at DCF and exemplifies exceptional leadership through his ability to inspire innovation while building a collaborative team culture. As our Customer Success Manager, he has helped to transform our project team and created a setting where each team member feels appreciated as a part of the "CT-KIND Family." Chandra exemplifies how effective leadership can drive both individual and organizational success and has established cross-functional partnerships that have improved communication between different divisions and has enhanced collaboration, both internally and externally. His leadership approach demonstrates how one person can change and strengthen an entire project team for the better, even when facing obstacles and resistance. Chandra is considered a person who is the salt of the earth and is very kind, always willing to help others and has the ability to communicate technology in plain language. For those who do not know Chandra, he is also extremely smart and has an excellent sense of humor! He always has a positive attitude, even when working into the late hours of the night addressing technical issues and doing everything, he can decrease any system disruptions for DCF staff. As we move into this new and exciting era of technology in child welfare, Chandra is determined to continue to improve the



user's experience and make their tasks more efficient so they can spend less time doing data entry and more quality time with the families and providers DCF serves, which in turn will lead to better outcomes. His leadership skills shine through with his ability to balance demanding deadlines with team member development, solve complex problems and ensure every team member has opportunities for professional growth. Chandra has been a driving force behind bridging the gap between business and IT and should be recognized for his unique contributions to DCF and has become a powerful motivator and asset for the agency.

Michelle Laboy - Continuous Quality Improvement

The Bureau of Continuous Quality Improvement is proud to recognize and celebrate Program Supervisor Michele Laboy as the Employee of the Month. Michele was nominated by the Bureau Chief and all four Directors for her outstanding contributions and unwavering commitment. With 28 years of service to the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Michele brings a wealth of experience to her role. Throughout her distinguished career, she has held diverse positions across various areas, including:

- Area Office (Investigations, Ongoing Services, and Probate)
- DCF Careline
- Foster Care Division
- Central Office, Bureau of Continuous Quality Improvement – CFSR Division

For more than three decades, Michele has exemplified exceptional leadership and teamwork. Her steadfast commitment to the safety and well-being of children is evident in every role she undertakes. Known for her extensive knowledge of the Agency, its policies, and systems, Michele is the go-to person for questions, assistance, or locating those hard-to-find policies and practice guides. Michele has also worked at CT-KIND and is truly our in-division computer expert, who is always willing to lend a helping hand when staff need extra assistance navigating technology! Michele is an exceptionally reliable team member. When the Bureau recently faced a staffing shortage regarding the PIP safety group and critical incidents, Michele stepped up immediately.

Without hesitation, she seamlessly integrated these urgent responsibilities with her existing full-time duties. Her assistance was invaluable, and her work was, as always, impeccable. Michele Laboy is a tremendous asset to the CQI team and the entire agency.



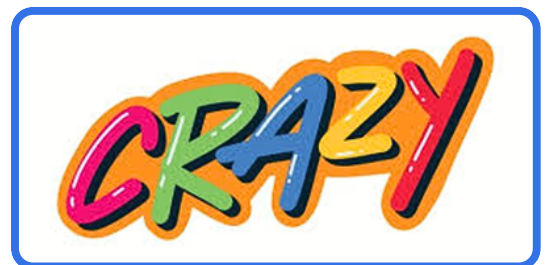
Ken Jewell - Fiscal

It is with great pride that DCF Payroll Office recognizes and nominates Ken Jewell, for Employee of the Month for November 2025. Ken Jewell is currently titled as a "Payroll Officer 2" in the DCF Payroll Office. Although he has many roles, he is a Payroll Supervisor and serves as the DCF's Benefits Specialist, handling all confidential and sensitive benefit concerns for the agency. He is the

DCF liaison to the State Comptrollers, Unum Group Life, Anthem, Cigna and DCF employees. Ken also trains all newly hired payroll clerks and supervises Payrolls 3-Shift Operations Payroll Clerks. Ken's DCF payroll experience over time includes processing various payrolls of every DCF region and Office at one time or another and is currently assigned to processing the Torrington Office payroll. Ken is extremely knowledgeable and always available to answer just about any Payroll question or concern. Ken started at DCF as a Payroll Clerk approximately 20 years ago and worked his way up the ladder to 3 shift Operations Payroll Clerk, then "Payroll Officer 1" and eventually "Payroll Officer 2," which is 3rd in command in DCF's Payroll Office. Ken's dedication and diligence treat every paycheck and benefit transaction as if it were his own. DCF payroll staff respect his knowledge and commitment to processing accurate payrolls. For these reasons and more, the nomination for "Employee of the Month" for November 2025 in the DCF Payroll Office is Ken Jewell.

Lori Cote and Sarah Lucia – Foster Care Division

Social Worker extraordinaire Lori Cote is nominated for Employee of the Month. She is serving the public in many ways in her capacity of Statewide Training for core licensing under Brian Donahue, SWS, in FCD Central Office team. Lori has 31 years in the department and 14 years in the Foster Care Division as her passion is training potential caregivers. She has provided extensive leadership and expertise in the areas of pivoting to virtual training. Lori's extensive input on enhancements to the kinship training series, and since 2022 as part of the centralized training team, has led the way for CT to implement and roll out the current curriculum "National Training and Development Curriculum" aka NTDC! The was no small feat and the collaboration with her peers, Spaulding for Children, CAFAF, and CPA partners, continues to coordinate ongoing partner meetings to assure program fidelity across the state. Lori's heart for children and families is demonstrated across all aspects of her work. She takes the lead on organizing the shared training calendar, planning logistics for Weekend of the Lifetime events, has excellent technical skills with teams, zoom, excel and the newest software program CT TRAIN for use by trainers and families as our newest LMS system. She was a strong supporter of the "Learning through Play" Lego-DCF initiative and brought fun activities to applicants. She always volunteers for a seat at the table when developing enhancements or implementing improved practice; all with the focus on our caregivers first! She stands out with her a special way of bringing out the best in others, with her warm, genuine, sincere approach with peers, families and partners. Without a doubt, we know it's a privilege to get to know Lori and work with her!



Norwich Foster Care Division Placement Specialist Sarah Lucia is also being nominated for Employee of the Month. Sarah is an invaluable asset to the

Department. She has been a dedicated worker in all the roles she has held during her 21-year career. She has kept the needs of the families, children and her co-workers at the forefront of her work. In her current role, Sarah has developed a positive relationship with foster parents to be able to support the families and ensure they are prepared and made to be a part of each child's team. She has developed their trust by providing clear information at her disposal to allow families to make an educated decision regarding accepting placements. Sarah has become a strong advocate for providers and their individual needs to ensure they are able to meet children's needs. Sarah is open and honest in her interactions with all teams. She has worked effortlessly to secure the best available home for the children the Department serves with the limited resources available she has to work with. Sarah has been able to work collaboratively with statewide matchers and has assisted with other Offices' placement needs whenever possible. Sarah has developed a rapport with the Office members to create an open line of communication and trust between all work groups to achieve everyone's common goal to meet children's needs. She is a true example of a team member. Sarah has continued to be determined and creative in her approach to her job. She is a positive entity within the office and has a calming demeanor even during times of chaos and uncertainty. She takes pride in the work she does and the outcomes for everyone. Sarah is a true example of what can be achieved with hard work, positivity and teamwork.

Nicole Niewiarowski - Behavioral Health and Community Services

Norwich Substance Use Specialist (SU) RRG Nicole Niewiarowski is a shining example of professional excellence and commitment to the families we serve. Since transitioning to her role as SU Specialist in the Norwich Area Office in June 2022, Nicole has managed an extremely high workload, completing over 300 consultations in the past year—while maintaining meticulous documentation, with narratives entered within 24 hours on almost all cases. She gatekeeps multiple SU programs and is a vital team member of a randomized-control study for a new treatment model through MDFT International. Despite this workload, Nicole consistently seeks training and opportunities for professional development. Nicole is an active member of the HART team and serves as a Human Trafficking trainer for partners in the community. Nicole also supervises an MSW intern, providing support and guidance, and ensuring they meet all clinical and academic requirements. Nicole is highly respected by peers and colleagues and is often asked to provide staff support and training on a wide variety of topics related to substance use. Intake PS Jenn Wilcox stated "Nicole is a treasure! Nicole is helpful, knowledgeable, available, and just "gets it." Nicole's prior experience as a Social Worker for the Department makes her an



invaluable resource when seeking out clinical assistance for cases. Nicole can provide both old and new staff with help navigating the CPS and substance abuse worlds together which is no easy feat. Despite the very high quantity of consults and cases she is involved in she is always available, and her work exceeds expectations every single time. We are spoiled to have such a talented member of the RRG working with our office." Office Director Dave Silva added, "Nicole is a very active member of the Norwich Office and goes above and beyond for our Office. She is very active at ensuring our staff are educated on all the services in the area and is willing to call providers when there is any confusion regarding services provided. Given the number of consults that Nicole is part of, it is even more impressive how she still completes timely and comprehensive documentation of such." Nicole is a highly valued member of the RRG team—Norwich and Region 3 are very fortunate to have her!

Jeannine Wiese - Careline

Jeannine Wiese is nominated for Employee of the Month by her Unit. She is recognized for her exceptional work as a Child Abuse and Neglect Careline Screener. Her direct supervisor, Linda Harris-Neckles wrote "Jeannine is deserving of the Employee of the Month. Jeannine is diligent in her work, always willing to help her peers, her supervisor and management. Jeannine is technologically competent and adapts to new technologies quickly. During CT Kind implementation, on her onsite day, Jeannine was walking the floor helping many of her peers with the new database. In our unit, before we call IT, we call Jeannine. She has become a 1st shift "go to person for IT help"! always tell her that there is position waiting for her in IT. She is humble about her abilities and will say "oh no"! Jeannine expresses her concerns for work efficiency in a way that is never a complaint. She graciously accepts assignments and sets priorities. She is informative and always communicates with Supervisors when she has any problems but mostly trouble shoots the tech issues and fixes them herself. She offers suggestions and is responsive to the outcomes whatever that may be. I have been her Supervisor since she came to Careline, and she has blossomed from caterpillar to butterfly as one of Careline's best Social Workers. It is a joy to work with her." Her peer, Michele Soler wrote "Jeannine is always willing to help at any time during the day. She often has helpful hints as well, especially during COVID, she made sure to share all documents we would need at home. Her knowledge of computer technology is the best in our unit LOL. I joke with her about going to the IT department. She is a quick learner and wants to understand the new system to be able to help. She is also a wonderful person inside and out. She is a great mother and juggles her family and their needs, like caring for relatives when they are sick and continuing to do the daily work at DCF. She really has a heart of gold. Overall, I think Jeannine is a hard worker here at Careline. I did not know her in the Region, but I am sure she was wonderful to the families she served. Happy to nominate her for this award." Her peer Kim Jacewicz-

Capel wrote "We are so pleased to recommend Jeannine for this honor as she is a true team player. Anything that needs to be done, large or small, she is willing to assist with, whether it falls in her job duties or not. She is supportive of her team members and remains calm and professional even under stressful situations. In addition, she brings to the table a plethora



of talent including computer expertise. If she has not heard of a technique or initiative before, she takes it upon herself to learn it to the highest level and then shares it with her peers. Jeannine works tirelessly for the good of the Agency and CT's children."

Rachel Beitman - Bridgeport Area Office

It is the Bridgeport Office's pleasure to nominate Rachel Beitman for Employee of the Month. Rachel has been employed with the Department of Children and Families as a Social Work Case Aide since March of 2015. Ms. Beitman has worked primarily with our Juvenile Justice unit (prior to the transition of that work to CSSD), and Ongoing Services. During her tenure, Ms. Beitman has shown herself to be an incredible partner to our staff as well as our families. In a time when our federal government has left many families uncertain about the future of essential supports like SNAP benefits, Rachel Beitman has reminded us how much we can count on one another. Rachel went above and beyond to bring the community together and collect gift cards for DCF families in the Bridgeport catchment area who may be impacted by potential changes to federal assistance programs. Because of her compassion and determination, these families have food on their tables and clothes for their children. Her efforts have brought warmth, dignity, and hope to those who need it most – adding a little extra light to this holiday season. In years past, Rachel has called on her community network to gather holiday gifts for children and youth in care, as well as on In-Home cases. She has worked tirelessly to brighten the holiday season for families in need. Rachel, thank you for being such a beautiful human and for always putting our clients' best interests at the forefront. You inspire all of us with your heart, your kindness, and your unwavering dedication.

Terry Harper - Norwalk Area Office

Terry Harper is nominated as the Norwalk Office's Employee of the Month. Her Supervisor Shirley Napol wrote, "I would like to recognize Terry for her outstanding dedication, exceptional performance, and unwavering commitment to our agency's values. Terry has consistently demonstrated professionalism and a positive attitude that inspires those around her. She not only excels in her individual responsibilities as a Probate Social Worker but also goes above and

beyond to support her colleagues and contributes to a collaborative, uplifting work environment within her unit. With her quiet demeanor, Terry manages to "sneak in" her sense of humor and spread her work ethic throughout our Probate Team. Her reliability, strong work ethic, patience, and passion for what we do has made a meaningful impact on our team's success. I am proud to be her supervisor. We are incredibly grateful for the dedication she brings to her role every day. Please join us in congratulating Terry Harper on this well-deserved recognition!"

Jacqueline (Jackie) Vidal - Waterbury Area Office

Jackie truly exemplifies what a Social Worker is and is well deserving of the Employee of the Month Award. She has gone above and beyond what is asked of her. Jackie has had some of the most difficult cases on her caseload, that have been heavily involved both internally and externally. She has been able to remove barriers which presented DCF entering the family's spaces. Jackie is the voice of her



families and the children that she serves. Not only has she been recognized for her work within the Office, but she is also recognized for her work at court. Assistant Attorney General Lori Knuth wrote this about her: "I just wanted to take a moment to reach out to you both regarding Jacqueline Vidal. I think I remember telling you on a TEAMS meeting once that Jackie is just phenomenal. However, I want to take a moment to put that in writing because I just cannot sing her praises enough. I can say that without a doubt, Jackie is the best social worker with whom I have ever had the pleasure of working. I worked with Jackie years ago as a Panel Attorney and now as an AAG. She is quite possibly the hardest working, brightest, most diligent, most compassionate, and most delightful Social Worker and individual. She also has a stellar reputation among the panel for these very same qualities. I want you both to know that Jackie's dedication to the families we serve has not gone unnoticed. She is an irreplaceable asset to the department, and I just wanted to tell you how very much she is appreciated."

Jamie Boulanger - Torrington Area Office

The Torrington office is proud to nominate Jamie Boulanger for her exceptional dedication and impact as a Social Worker. Jamie never says no when asked for help, no matter how full her plate already is. Jaime consistently produces a high volume of quality work, all while prioritizing her client's needs over external pressures or deadlines. Even during the busiest times, Jamie somehow manages to get her cases submitted on time, demonstrating not only strong time management but also an unwavering commitment to doing things right. Jamie also serves as the outpost at both (until recently) the Torrington Police Department and the Center for Youth and Families, nurturing community relationships with professionalism. These partnerships that Jamie has created with the community have helped the Agency, families and the children we serve.

One of her greatest strengths is her ability to have tough, honest conversations with parents. She is able to balance empathy with accountability in a way that builds trust and promotes change. Jamie's skills, reliability, and unwavering support from her coworkers make her an invaluable asset to our Torrington Intake team and the families we serve. We appreciate all you do for T-town Jamie, THANK YOU!!!!

Gerard Downes - New Haven Area Office

We would like to nominate our Program Supervisor, Gerard Downes, for recognition as Employee of the Month because he is truly an exceptional leader and human being. He consistently goes above and beyond in his role, demonstrating deep care and conscientiousness in every decision he makes. He leads with empathy,

integrity and vision, always striving to see the best in everyone. Our team feels genuinely supported, valued, and inspired under his leadership. He is always there when we need guidance, encouragement, or simply someone to listen to. We are incredibly grateful to have him as our Supervisor and believe he exemplifies what great leadership looks like.



Yesenia Rodriguez - Milford Area Office

Milford Social Work Supervisor Yesenia Rodriguez as an exceptional supervisor who consistently demonstrates calm, steady, and purposeful leadership. She is being nominated as Employee of the Month. Yesenia maintains a professional demeanor even in the most challenging situations, modeling the kind of composure that inspires confidence in her team. She is a truly hands-on leader - providing in person supervision, going into the field to support staff when needed, and ensuring no one feels alone in their work. Her strong technical skills, which have been a challenge as of lately, and proactive communication with her manager contribute to a well-coordinated and efficient unit. What also sets her apart is her humility and her ability to adapt her supervisory style to each workers strengths and individual needs. She invests in her team's growth, and as a result, every member of her team has been able to succeed under her guidance. Her commitment, versatility and genuine care for her staff make her an outstanding Supervisor and a deserving nominee for recognition. She also shines particularly brighter during the month of December because she absolutely loves the season and has sprinkled extra cheer with her constant presence and her inviting, decorated office with a treat for all enjoy.

Natasha Reed - Norwich Area Office

Natasha Reed has been with the Department for approximately 20 years. She is patient, compassionate, knowledgeable, and a star Social Worker for the Department. She is always positive about the Department. Anyone that knows

her always says the same things: That she is a great Social Worker. Although she should be a Supervisor or above, she hasn't yet made a decision to interview. Natasha works tirelessly on a daily basis, often working overtime. She ensures parents know their rights and resources that are available to them. Natasha tries to ensure that a case can safely close but knows how to assess accurately and immediately to ensure no child is left in an unsafe situation. She is a clinician at heart and works on each case with the same determination, which is to provide the best services to the family while also portraying the Department in a positive light. If anyone in my family had to have a DCF case or a DCF SW, we would want it to be Natasha. She treats people how we would like to be treated. Natasha goes out of her way to do stuff for families. She drives the families around, takes them to all their appointments, tours schools with them, makes sure they have all their basic needs met and if they don't--she finds someone in the community who can help them. Natasha is like having a built-in resource finder in the unit--whenever staff have questions about a family needing support or resources--

Natasha is always the person to answer them. She is always there to help the unit when in need. Recently, our new Trainee to the unit had her first removal and Natasha was there every step of the way to help her with anything she needed. We never have to worry that what must be done on Natasha's cases will get done, as it always does. She continues to take really challenging cases that come from Intake, or we transfer cases where other workers are stuck

moving the family forward, and Natasha always comes in and makes things better. Natasha is an asset to the Agency and the Norwich office and community. Congratulations Natasha!



Marie Bartell - Middletown Area Office

Marie Bartell is being nominated for Employee of the Month in the Middletown Office. Marie has been with the Department since 1987! Marie is a Social Worker Case Aide (SWCA), and a leader amongst the Middletown team. She is highly respected by her co-workers, described as approachable, dependable, and flexible. Marie is always willing to help, often taking the last-minute overtime assignments, no one wants! She has a calm and peaceful demeanor, which is acknowledged and appreciated by her coworkers and the families she serves. Marie has been a champion for the Youth Advisory Board in the past, dedicating her time and energy to adolescents in care. Marie has worked with many reluctant family members and supervised many difficult ongoing visits. She is respectful of clients, DCF staff, providers, and foster families. Despite a SWCA shortage in Middletown and her rigorous schedule, Marie maintains a strong work ethic, optimistic attitude, and steadiness. Thank you for all you do Marie!!

Luz Escobar - Willimantic Area Office

Often, an individual is nominated for a singular, above and beyond achievement. This nomination is not for a standout defining moment, but for Luz's consistent daily work product, work ethic, and the support and advocacy she offers to her families. She is being nominated for Employee of the Month. Luz is the kind of professional that does her job with competency and without fanfare. It's easy to forget she has only been with the Department for a little over a year. She came to the Department with related experience, and she has used that to develop her child protection lens. Luz has adapted well to our tools, such as the ABCD paradigm and SDM. She references them when reviewing her work and when she is on the witness stand testifying in court. She has been an effective witness, and her work has been reflected in a Judge's decision, demonstrating its effectiveness. Luz has developed strong professional relationships with providers and uses those relationships to address family needs and issues. This was very evident as we watched her facilitate a recent meeting with a group of providers. And she cares. She often makes that extra call; to double-check something, or to try to get something taken care of for a family. If she says she will have something done, you can count on her. We could go on, and reference her critical thinking, her interviewing skills, her effective source monitoring, and engagement skills. It's all evidence of what an asset she is to our office.

Sarah Kalka - Hartford Area Office

Sarah Kalka has been with the agency for almost 10 years. In that time, she has soared. All those that know her, work with her, or even just talk to her, know that she is an intelligent, caring, hardworking advocate for the children and families she serves. Sarah is incredibly skilled at understanding people, displays a high level of emotional intelligence, strong communication

skills, and adaptability. She is certainly wise beyond her years. Over the last six + months, Sarah has been tasked not just with a high and demanding caseload like the rest of Hartford, but she has had the responsibility of one child who has been placed on a social admission at CCMC since April. Sarah happens to be one of our two liaisons at CCMC, so her rapport there has come in handy. Sarah has had to organize the child's total care, including transportation for school, every appointment, visitation, specialist, etc. More importantly, she has had to ensure 24/7 supervision of the child at CCMC. This child has needs beyond what most families have been open to working with, but Sarah has taken her permanency by the reigns and been organized, thoughtful and diligent all while also handling the rest of her caseload. Organizing spreadsheets for every hour that this child is not in school takes time, patience and constant flexibility and coordination. Sarah has also ensured every family member, attorney, provider, and hospital staff know what is happening from day to day and often hour by hour. She has held weekly meetings with providers, FCD, AMC, CASA, and others.



She has not only facilitated these meetings, but she is aware, alert, and in charge. She knows everything that is happening, how it happened, and what is coming next, despite the "red tape" within our system. The job is very hard, and when you add all the extra things she's had to do, and she did it with grace and a smile. We are grateful to have such a dedicated, hardworking, caring, and empathic Permanency Social Worker who has consistently put this child first while never stopping meeting the day-to-day needs of her other families.

Donna Biancardi - Manchester Area Office

Donna will be retiring with 35 years of service. She has been in the Rockville, Willimantic and Manchester Offices. She has been an asset to the foster/adoptive families that she has worked with for decades!! Donna has always been organized, transparent and thorough with her assessments. She has always collaborated with CPS teams (even before it was a benchmark!!). Donna can confront safety issues/concerns in a professional and support manner. More recently, she has been a queen of overtime, helping CPS staff with after-hours visits. Donna and her positive attitude will be missed. But we are all excited for her to retire and start the next chapter of her life!! Donna is a dedicated worker when working with others on their caseload. She communicates clearly and often while thinking of permanency for the child and stability for the foster home. Donna cares not just about the foster homes she serves, but the children there and always thinks in the short and long term about what is best for all. Collaboration is key when we do this work and it is always on her mind! Donna has made an incredible impact through her compassionate work with both family and her colleagues. No matter what the task, she approaches every interaction with warmth and a smile. Her work ethic, diligence, passion and wisdom are hard to match. Always the consummate professional, Donna has been a leader at this Agency and will be greatly missed by not only the families she has served, but her colleagues as well. She is very vested and devoted to our foster children as well as foster parents. Donna exemplifies excellence as a DCF Foster Care Social Worker and beyond. She displays empathy and navigates challenging situations with ease and professionalism. She cares deeply about the families that she works with and often goes above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that her families feel heard and supported.



Greg Castro - New Britain Area Office

Social Work Supervisor Greg Castro is being nominated for Employee of the Month by one of his Social Worker Trainees. Greg is a valued leader in the New Britain office. We are sure many would agree that SWS Gregory Castro is deserving of a shout out! As a Training Supervisor, Greg goes above and beyond to support new hires and instills the importance of community within the office. He not only has an abundance of CPS knowledge, but he is

very much aware of the challenges new hires face in the field. In situations where coverage is needed, Greg steps in to support his team. From transporting kiddos to camp, to watching toddlers while the Social Worker prepares legal filings, Greg is there. Having a Supervisor that radiates empathy for our clients and is in tune with the wellbeing of his team has made transitions to DCF seamless. Thank you Greg for all that you do!

Cristina Ortiz - Meriden Area Office

Cristina Ortiz is being nominated by multiple Supervisors that report to her for the Employee of the Month. Cristina has been with the Department since 2005 and worked in the Bridgeport, New Haven, Norwalk, and Meriden Offices in her time at DCF. She has been in the role of Intake Program Supervisor in Meriden since February 2022. During her time in Meriden, she has demonstrated outstanding leadership with high profile and complicated cases. She consistently exceeds leadership expectations and goes above and beyond to support her Supervisors and staff. Cristina is always available to her Supervisors; she is happy to cover staff directly when all Supervisors request the same time off and has conducted visits to assist. On one occasion, she went to a father's home at 10pm to assess his home to assist the Social Worker in an effort to prevent a removal. Cristina has sat with children in the office during emergencies when there were removals. She is all hands-on-



deck when needed and offers help in any way she can to assist. These are just a few examples of how Cristina is supportive of her staff. She is very knowledgeable, thinks out of the box to resolve and solve problems, thinks quickly on her feet, and works long after 5 pm. She is willing to share her knowledge and help educate her Supervisors and staff to help them with the work and promote the transfer of learning. Cristina is about the work and is dedicated to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children served in the Meriden Area Office. Cristina is a true asset to the Agency and her staff in Meriden. She truly deserves this recognition for her outstanding work and leadership. On the lighter side, Cristina also makes mean homemade bread that we all look forward to when she brings it to the office to share! Office Director Adam Texeira stated, "I cannot express how grateful I am to have Cristina as a Program Supervisor in the Meriden Office. I believe one of the greatest compliments we can give in this work is that you have the absolute trust of everyone around you. That is who Cristina is. Her team trusts her without question, and I trust her without question. I know that she is always on top of everything going on with her team and always making sound decisions. Cristina epitomizes everything you want in a leader within the Agency. She has a command of the work, has instilled accountability among her workgroup, and is a true part of the team. Cristina is such a vital part of the Meriden team, and we are all so thankful to her and the work that she is doing daily."

Karen Keatley - Transitional Supports and Services

Karen Keatley is being nominated for the November 2025 Employee of the Month

because we can think of no better person to be honored in this fashion. We can guarantee she will not be pleased with the nomination, however those of us who work with her know she is very deserving of consideration. Karen has worked with our families who face incarceration for the majority of her distinguished career. She is very well known and respected within the Department of Corrections. Karen is a passionate advocate for the rights of our incarcerated father's when it comes to their visitation and services needed to rehabilitate. She has helped to reform many of DCF and DOC's practices toward the betterment of the system. Karen also moonlights as the "milk lady", delivering breastmilk from incarcerated mothers to their newborn children in foster care. We could not imagine doing this job without her partnership, as she is a true powerhouse in this area. Thank you, Karen, for all that you do!

Noemi Hammonds - Commissioner's Office

Noemi is the Executive Secretary to Deputy Commissioner Stacey Gerber and Chief of Governmental Relations & Policy Vincent Russo and is a highly dependable and dedicated professional who consistently demonstrates exceptional work ethics and strong organizational and problem-solving skills. When your back is against the wall and you feel like you are buried to your eyeballs with work, this is the person you would want in your corner having your back and talking you off the ledge when you're ready to jump lol. She is a hardworking and detail-oriented person who anticipates the needs of the office, manages complex priorities and ensures the Commissioner's Office operates efficiently and with professionalism. Noemi is a team player and collaborates seamlessly with her colleagues across all levels of the agency, fostering a positive and solution focused environment. Her commitment to excellence, discretion, and respectful communication makes her a trusted partner in advancing the Commissioner's vision and supporting the agency's mission.

Lydia Jubrey - PRTF (North)

Lydia Jubrey, a Supervising Chef at Solnit North, is recognized for her outstanding commitment to both the staff she supervises and the youth we serve. Since her promotion to her current position a few years ago, she has remained dedicated to preparing delicious, nutritious meals from scratch

while fully meeting—and often exceeding—USDA Child Nutrition Requirements. Lydia maintains excellent communication with all departments, especially Medical and Business. Her team consistently meets the dietary and medical needs of the youth while also remaining fiscally responsible. She demonstrates strong financial stewardship by meeting weekly, monthly, and yearly budget goals, ensuring that when funds are needed for non-dietary areas of the facility, resources are available. As a Supervisor, Lydia is both fair and firm. She holds her staff accountable through daily informal check-ins and weekly formal meetings. She empowers her team by involving them in decision-making, which fosters a



**REALLY
GOOD**

strong, proud, and enjoyable work environment. Additionally, she works closely with her supervisor and understands that providing training and expanding staff knowledge strengthens the department and enhances both the dining experience and special events. Lydia also recognizes the important role nutrition plays in youth behavior and ensures meals are crafted with that awareness. We are extremely proud of the leader she has become—one her staff affectionately call “Momma Bear.” This nickname reflects the care, strength, and dedication she brings to her role every day.

Dr. Maritza Acosta - Bureau of External Affairs

Dr. Maritza Acosta is the Director of the Office of Community Relations and is the Bureau of External Affairs Employee of the Month! Dr. Acosta manages a complex and crisis driven Unit, responding to youth, families, foster parents, community members and others who are experiencing difficulties while involved with the Department. Often, they are desperate for answers and while in crisis, engage in emotional and highly charged discussions and written communications. Dr. Acosta's patience, grace and the ability to move past the way the message is being delivered to understand the underlying issue at hand and work towards resolution is admirable. Dr. Acosta is a true support to her staff as she creates an open, fun, and engaging work environment, while pushing them to be the best versions of themselves. It is her well-timed text messages, thoughtful acknowledgements and gestures, and sense of humor that put others at ease and serves as a nice relief from this critical work. Dr. Acosta is extremely well-respected by peers within DCF for her collaborative efforts to resolve issues and non-judgmental manner in solving problems. Dr. Acosta's calm and personable approach - with those internally and externally - serve to enhance the Department's image, develop trust with our families and the community, and increase the overall effectiveness of the Agency. Of course, we must add that she is also known for her stylish outfits, always available candy dish, stories of her never-ending weekend commitments and love of her family. Dr. Acosta will soon be transferring to another position with the Agency, and she will be truly missed in this role.



Nicole Phoenix - PRTF (South)

CSW Nicole Phoenix was selected as Employee of the Month at Solnit South PRTF because she has demonstrated an exceptional level of leadership, stability, and heart during a period when the Lakota unit needed it most. For more than four months, Nicole stepped into the role of Lead CSW in the absence of the assigned lead without hesitation and without ever missing a beat. She spent half of her time teaching, coaching, and mentoring every new staff member who came onto the unit during her shift, often picking up additional shifts to ensure continuity of care for the youth we serve. Through a period of staffing shortages and transition, Nicole was the steady foundation that kept expectations clear, routines consistent,

and the team working together. Nicole brings a unique balance of no-nonsense confidence and maternal nurturance that staff consistently describe as her "mother first" approach. That value is reflected in the way she shows up: consistently, compassionately direct, always centering what our youth need even when it requires hard conversations or firm boundaries. Her quiet strength and keen awareness of the "underground" dynamics among youth allow her to identify and address potential safety concerns early and skillfully. She builds relationships with each youth, shifting her approach to meet their individual needs which is something not everyone can do. The youth rely on her for emotional stability, advocacy, and guidance, especially during second shift, which has been critically short-staffed. Despite these challenges, Nicole has remained dependable, steady, and deeply invested in the young people she serves. Her creativity and initiative extend far beyond daily operations. When the campus beautician was out, Nicole was the one who ensured that the girls on the unit still had access to hair care knowing firsthand the impact that feeling good can have on a youth's confidence and behavior. She developed a partnership with a local Middletown salon to make this happen, showing once again that she will go above and beyond to support our kids. She also completes youth payroll and has created meaningful work opportunities that motivate youth to participate in the Work Pay Program, reinforcing responsibility, pride, and earning potential. In addition to her work on the unit, Nicole has organized multiple unit-wide and PRTF-wide activities that have revived the sense of community and belonging across Solnit South. Staff recognize her as a team player, a role model for new employees, and someone who brings people together through consistent expectations, follow-through, and genuine care. Even our most challenging youth have responded to the relationships she has built, a testament to her patience, presence, and skill. For her leadership, her unwavering commitment, and the compassion she brings to Solnit South every day, we are proud to honor Nicole Phoenix as our Employee of the Month.

Due to an error in technology, the Milford Area Office October 2025 Employee of the Month submission was not included. Her nomination is as follows:

Mitchelle Blanco - Milford Area Office

Mitchelle Blanco has been a dedicated social worker in the Milford Regional Office for 11 years. For the majority of her career, she has served as an ongoing services worker with specialties in permanency and supporting children with complex needs. For a period of time, she also served as the Office Resource Specialist, with responsibilities of searching, engaging, vetting and assessing potential placements, which supported the entire Milford office. This ensured that children entering care were placed with kin, whenever possible. Michelle exudes professionalism and navigates the complex needs of the children she serves with

skill and compassion. A typical day for her is rarely typical at all as she consistently adjusts her schedule to respond to emergencies. She easily pivots to be present with her children and families in times of crisis. Her ability to step in immediately and mitigate challenges exemplifies her commitment and dedication. Mitchell also has lived experience that enhances her high quality of expertise and knowledge. She is a resident of our catchment area but originally was born and lived in the Bronx, NY. She is very proud of her families heritage and culture, being from the Dominican Republic, which brings an abundance of knowledge and thoughtfulness around assimilation and culture. And for many years, she was a therapeutic foster parent to children with high end, specialized, mental health needs. Throughout her career at the Department, Mitchell has also built a strong network of professional relationships. These connections provide her unit and the office with excellent contact for services and supports that meet the diverse needs of families and children. Beyond her professional expertise, Mitchell's wonderful sense of humor brings much needed relief during high-pressure and stressful times, making her a supportive and approachable colleague. Many staff turn to Ms. Blanco for her knowledge and guidance around permanency planning and the ICPC process, to name a few. She is considered an expert in achieving permanency for children and is also highly regarded for her work in facilitating placement of children out of state. This expertise reflects her deep commitment to ensuring that children unable to remain with their parents, are placed with relatives or trusted family connections, whenever possible. Mitchell Blanco is a true asset to the Milford Regional Office. Her expertise, compassion, and collaborative spirit not only benefit the children and families she serves but also uplifts her colleagues. She is a pleasure to work with and is most deserving of the recognition as the Milford employee of the month.



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